

# Diocese Listening Tour

**Report prepared by Bishop Louis Tylka**

Diocese of Peoria

In 2021, Bishop Louis Tylka embarked upon a listening series throughout the Diocese of Peoria in Illinois from July through September. The listening sessions were envisioned and conducted in a spirit of openness and dialogue and with the blessing of the former Bishop of Peoria, His Excellency Daniel Jenky. The newly appointed Coadjutor Bishop of the Diocese, Bishop Tylka asked each parish within the Diocese to convene a team of four lay parishioners to review and respond to four key questions:

- What do you see as the greatest opportunity for the Church today?
- What do you consider to be the greatest challenge we are facing in the Church today?
- Name the top three priorities you are addressing in your parish.
- What specific advice would you give to your new bishop about the Diocese of Peoria?

## Voice collection team and process

It was suggested that the team comprise the two parish trustees as well as two other established parish lay leaders. The four leaders, selected by the parish pastor, were then invited to gather with other parishes in their Vicariate to share their parish's response at a formal listening session. Prior to the Vicariate sessions, the process for gathering the insights of the parishioners of each parish varied. Some parishes sought input from every member of their parish, while other parishes gathered members of their parish council or leadership teams. In some cases, some parishes relied on a small team of lay leaders to review and respond to the questions posed.

Twelve Vicariate sessions were held throughout the diocese to provide each parish the opportunity to share their responses with other parishes in their region. All 158 parishes of the Diocese of Peoria participated in the Vicariate listening sessions in some form. Additional responses were submitted in writing to Bishop Tylka for further review and reflection. It should be noted that this listening tour was for the lay faithful only. No parish clergy participated in the listening sessions, which gave the lay faithful a distinct opportunity to openly share their thoughts without any reservations.

## Feedback from clergy, youth

Prior to the listening series of the lay faithful, Bishop Louis Tylka met with each Vicariate of priests in a similar spirit of openness and intentional listening, allowing them to voice their

concerns, needs, and hopes for the Church in Peoria. The clergy expressed a desire to hold listening sessions on a more consistent basis. It was evident that they desired to live in synodality in the future. In addition to the Vicariate listening sessions, Bishop Tylka met with a group of high school youth from various parishes throughout the Diocese, posing to them the same four key questions as the lay faithful. All three groups expressed similar thoughts, which are outlined in this document.

Perhaps, most importantly, the providential nature of this listening tour should be noted, as it began before the initiative set forth by this synod to bring a greater sense of unity to the Diocese. The listening sessions were all conducted in a spirit of prayer. Each beginning with a solemn invocation of the Holy Trinity and reading of Sacred Scripture, and ending with his final blessing.

### **Gathering in faith yields hope**

The fruits of this process were many, but among the most significant is a restored hope in the leadership and direction of the Diocese of Peoria and in the universal Church. The devout people of God earnestly shared their thoughts and feelings and were received with a paternal embrace of kindness and compassion. The Vicariate gatherings included lay leaders from a variety of diverse parishes, who came together despite differences in a geographical area, age, race, ethnicity, and gender, so that they may reflect on the greatest challenges and opportunities the Church faces. Their time together ultimately gave rise to an increased fervor for the proclamation of the Gospel in a new way and a sense of unity in this mission despite their differences. The general disposition of the lay leaders was one of deep conviction in the Catholic faith, of longing for deeper communion, and of great hope for the future of the Church. The faithful of the Diocese of Peoria were grateful to be with their local shepherd and with fellow lay Catholics, who shared the same values, desires, hardships, experiences, and love of their Catholic faith. It offered them all a unique encounter with other lay faithful throughout the Diocese, giving rise to a richer sense of communion and belonging in a local church. The sessions enabled the longings of the faithful to be articulated.

Amid a sense of pride in the Church and hope for the future, the lay faithful leaders also noted some tensions they experience. They expressed the difficulty of upholding fidelity to the Magisterium while reaching out and embracing the marginalized. How does the Church embrace the sinner, but not the sin without giving the appearance of compromising Catholic doctrine? Their responses seemed to pose the questions: What does faithfulness to the Catholic Church look like in the modern world amid a culture that is increasingly at odds with the Church, and how do we express what is core to our faith? Many expressed a personal tension between their own deep love and commitment to the Catholic faith and the indifference they experience among Catholics no longer in full communion with the

Church, and those who have no faith at all. They seemed to express a sense of frustration with the daunting task of making disciples as faithful Catholics engaged in the life of their parish lessen. The decrease in number of vocations to the priesthood was also expressed as a difficulty.

## Distilling the feedback into 12 themes

Major commonalities were articulated by the lay faithful throughout the twelve listening sessions and in the individual written responses. They are as follows.

### **1. Evangelize and welcome others back to the Church more intentionally**

Among the most significant was the opportunity to reach out with greater competency, intentionality, and new vigor to those who have yet to have a true encounter with the Gospel message and those who need to re-encounter the Gospel, having distanced themselves from the Church over the years. A wide range of proposed reasons for falling away from the practice of full participation was cited, including repercussions of COVID-19, lack of catechesis, societal influence, as well as complacency, and indifference. Several others shared concerns that some people might experience a lack of meaningful connection to a parish family, while others might fail to have a sense of belonging to a loving and supportive parish, or fail to understand the Church's relevance in their own life. Several cited this to be a predominant issue for the youth and young adults, which leaves a generational gap among those active in their parishes.

The lay faithful seemed to express a true concern and sense of sadness—and, at times, even helplessness—over their brothers and sisters in the faith, who no longer are in full communion or who no longer fully practice their faith. The lay faithful's response did not clearly differentiate who is accountable and responsible for the outreach to those who have left. But, outreach opportunities were strongly identified as an opportunity for discipleship. Strategies were not proposed as to how to face this challenge. However, it was recommended that we better understand the specific reasons why people are leaving before strategic responses are developed.

In addition, it was articulated that as societal pressures increase against the Catholic faith, a more clear and exact representation of Church teachings needs to be adequately proclaimed in modes accessible to the laity today. Those attending the gatherings even made a distinction between what is perceived, or promoted, and prioritized as Catholic teaching versus what is authentic teaching.

## **2. Build relationships and improve outreach through social media**

The people of God articulated digital outreach as a strong opportunity and tool for evangelization and connectivity for the Diocese of Peoria. They proposed strengthened access to and use of Catholic-based social media. It is strongly believed that social media and digital connectivity are winning the attention, time, and focus among all ages but in particular, among youth and young adults. These technologies can and ought to be stewarded and deployed to vitalize the Gospel message and to extend a sense of belonging and connectivity to the Catholic Church. Further, such technologies have a necessary place in education, catechesis, formation, and communication. Many respondents suggest that discipleship and evangelization itself can and ought to be supported by social media with fresh, dynamic content shared in such modalities.

## **3. Cultivate faith and connectedness in youth and young adults**

Renewed attention and heightened focus devoted to youth and young adult ministry were predominant among many of the lay faithful's responses. An overwhelming number of responses highlighted the need for more comprehensive, intentional, connected, engaged, relevant, and quality strategies and operations for youth and young adults. The people of God had a common desire to build upon the developmental needs, aspirations, and relational desires of youth and young adults as they move beyond Confirmation, through college or trade schools, into early adulthood toward their vocation. Not nearly as predominant, but articulated just the same, was a need to continue to support, strengthen, and reinvigorate our Catholic Newman centers and outreach to college campuses. The people of the Diocese of Peoria shared a deep desire for youth to engage more fully in the liturgical life, sacramental life, and social life of the parish.

## **4. Strengthen formation and education at all levels**

The impact and efficacy of catechesis at all levels were repeatedly and vigorously called out as a key opportunity for the local Church. There is a distinct opportunity to re-imagine and re-engage all forms of catechesis, including sacramental preparation for youth, adults, and catechumen, catechesis in Catholic schools and religious education programs, family formation, adult formation, and formation for the Sacrament of Matrimony and Baptism. While current approaches to catechesis were not widely criticized, some articulated the need for added educational and catechetical emphasis on sacramental and moral teachings of the Church. The Diocese of Peoria has the opportunity to bolster and deepen effective education, catechesis, and formation.

One of the greatest challenges to the efficacy of catechesis is the lack of catechists and formation leaders. There was mention that many of those persons supporting such activities within parishes are older and have volunteered for some time. They hope to see in the near future greater leadership development for the next generation of catechists and

leaders. In reviewing the overall feedback received on this specific topic, it seems one of the most opportune areas would be to develop a mentorship program for new catechists.

### **5. Root and embody reverence for the Eucharist more deeply in faithful**

There was constant emphasis given to the centrality and necessity of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist in our lives. The faithful have the distinct opportunity to better appreciate and embody what the Sacrament of the Eucharist offers to us and why this matters in our faith journey. A need for deeper, more meaningful, and vitalized sacramental catechesis and formation, with particular emphasis on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, was repeatedly cited. In union with sacramental catechesis, intentional fellowship, communion with others, and intentional discipleship were also articulated as areas of improvement. In other words, there is a challenge to remain focused on the most precious and essential parts of the Catholic faith. Engaging these essential aspects to draw us into true communion with Christ and each other combats the current reality of believers who respond purely out of obligation or habit. In addition to the Eucharist, emphasis was also given to the need for improved catechesis on marriage, Christian sexuality, the dignity of the human person, and moral teachings, especially those related to abortion.

### **6. Call to renew discipleship**

There seems to be a growing tension or a widening of the gap between an intellectual understanding of the faith and an experiential understanding of the faith. The local Church recognized a disparity among many of the lay faithful in understanding and living out doctrine, liturgical and sacramental life, moral life, and prayer—in essence, they recognized flaws in embracing true discipleship. There were numerous challenges expressed about a lack of lived discipleship in our Catholic schools, programs for catechetical formation of children, and adult faith formation programs, as well as a lack of fellowship and lived community in parishes. The efforts in catechesis and formation in some cases are found inconsistent with the practice of faith inside the family, leaving the concern that ongoing sacramental appreciation or a sacramental worldview of Catholic living is being challenged from many sides.

### **7. Enhance support of and connection to Catholic schools**

Over and again, the lay faithful highlighted the significance of our Catholic schools and their need for support. The lay faithful are very proud of their Catholic schools and devote a great deal of resources and attention toward stewarding them. It is clear that the parish and local Catholic schools are vital organs within the local body of Christ and that our people are very devoted to their stewardship. They call upon diocesan and local parish initiatives to maintain or strengthen access to and the quality of education within our Catholic schools. In particular, financial resources beyond the traditional sources from the parish and tuition need to be investigated and employed. This issue is particularly relevant,

especially as some parishes and schools diminish in size, and as families may no longer fully support the Catholic parish itself. Several respondents spoke of the need to engage the infrastructural elements of our schools as well.

### **8. Grow sense of community and improve experience in local parishes**

The lay faithful of the Diocese of Peoria expressed a need for improving the lived parish experience. Several shared their ideal of warm hospitality and communion among their parish family. It was expressed that a parish should be a kind, welcoming, diverse, and loving community, where people have a sense of belonging and communion with each other. Many voices spoke of a need to intensify full and proper lay participation in the parish, especially as priestly vocations and lay volunteers diminish in number (or they have aged). Enhancing the parish experience also includes infusing beauty, richness, and reverence into all parish liturgies and devotions, making them more inviting and meaningful. Some responses mentioned the use of fine vestments, incense, and beautiful music as a means to more fully engage the faithful. Mentioned less, but still noteworthy was the inclusion of Latin Mass and other traditional liturgy.

### **9. Elevate pursuit of social justice within the Church**

Social justice within the life of the parish was often suggested as an opportunity for the Church. The local Church sees a need to build upon current charitable organizations—such as the Knights of Columbus, The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, and Catholic Charities—while revitalizing ministries to become increasingly effective.

Social injustices were named as a challenge for us as a Church. They suggested that we need to become ever more mindful of and responsive to persons who experience discrimination, alienation, lack of welcome, or who are without a sense of being fully embraced within the life of the parish. While several groups of persons were identified, including children and youth, women, and persons who are Hispanic for example, the essential message was that we need to be a Catholic Church where persons are not only passively “welcomed” to participate, but that persons are fully engaged in the life of the Church.

Several responses from the lay faithful indicate that women and persons who are Hispanic are two distinct populations within our diocesan community that can be encouraged and supported with greater focus and intentionality. It should be noted that there are a number of diverse ethnic groups that could be of equal focus, including Catholics of Asian descent, and native-born African Catholics, among others. Some have called out the opportunity for more intentional inclusivity and ministerial outreach, in alignment with Church teaching, to individuals who self-identify within various areas of the “LGBTQ+” community. Voiced interest in bringing the richness of Tradition was noted as an imperative of the Church. The

local parishes suggested ways to live out an authentic witness to the Church's teaching in outreach through various ministries and organizations as we respond to the immediate and emerging needs of the sick, the elderly, and persons at the margins of our communities – those with particular vulnerability in our times.

#### **10. Equip the faithful to respond to the signs of the times lovingly and actively**

Rising American secularism, relativism, perceived distance, and even hostility between the teachings and life of the Catholic Church and societal influences prove to be a challenge. Numerous responses expressed a greater disparity between the teachings, beliefs, values, moral convictions, and professed living of the Catholic Church with what persons experience in their encounters within society, the marketplace, academic institutions, media, and entertainment. It is recommended that the Catholic Church respond more creatively and with greater courage, conviction, and agility to the deep thirsts and needs of our time—especially with regard to issues like addiction, suicide, interpersonal relationships, despair, and poverty—without becoming angry, hostile, and divisive, and without widening ideological fissures within the Church. Overall, many of the respondents would like us to become active rather than passive in our response to the challenges we face. Addressing these issues is difficult, as they are many times shaped by local legislation that is adverse (contrary) to Catholic teaching.

#### **11. Restore trust in leadership with transparency and compassion**

Concern over the need to restore trust in leadership was voiced following the national and local scandals among the clergy. A dedicated commitment by Catholic leadership to oversee and protect its members as well as continuous transparency, is needed to promote the healing of broken trust and create a hope-filled future for the Church.

#### **12. Encourage authentic discernment and awareness to priestly vocations**

Finally, throughout the listening sessions, numerous responses identified the need to sustain and grow priestly vocations. The priests of the Diocese of Peoria are overextended. They discussed whether the current model of parish life is even sustainable, and agreed that attracting and maintaining solid and good candidates to the priesthood is a challenge we must face with increased vigor. There were many suggestions given along these lines ranging from vocational awareness talks and events, to wider promotion of the priesthood as a viable and beautiful vocation.

## Prayerfully moving forward

This process is a distinct invitation from the Holy Spirit for the Church of Peoria to grow in synodality. Synodality indicates the way in which the faithful of the Church, led by the Holy Spirit, journey together with one unified mission – a way to function in communion. Perhaps, one cultural image of the experience of synodality is a jigsaw puzzle. A puzzle is made of distinct shapes, colors, and details. Each piece is integral to the design of the whole picture and without each, there is a hole in the picture – something is missing – it is incomplete. This is also true within our Church when a member – their voice, their gifts – is not present or viewed as (or feels) insignificant. Their absence leaves the Church incomplete – a missing piece of fabric of the Church. St. Paul expresses the same reality in 1 Corinthians 12:

As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ.<sup>12</sup> Now the body is not a single part, but many.<sup>14</sup> If a foot should say, “Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body,” it does not for this reason belong any less to the body.<sup>15</sup> But as it is, God placed the parts, each one of them, in the body as he intended.<sup>18</sup> If they were all one part, where would the body be?<sup>19</sup> But as it is, there are many parts, yet one body.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are all the more necessary,<sup>22</sup> But God has so constructed the body as to give greater honor to a part that is without it,<sup>24</sup> so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same concern for one another.<sup>25</sup>

A final cultural image of the experience of synodality is the family. Imaged after the Holy Trinity, who in eternal exchange of love has distinct communion, God created the family to live in union and to journey together toward their ultimate goal - eternity in Christ. According to the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: “The family is, so to speak, the domestic church.” (*Lumen Gentium §11*) This means that the family functions similarly with a shared mission and shared experience as they journey together toward heaven.

In God’s Providence, Bishop Tylka has lived out significant aspects of synodality in his months of active listening sessions among both clergy and lay faithful across the entire Diocese. He has listened carefully to the longings and hopes of those he is called to serve and to lead. It is anticipated that the summary findings from written submissions and the hundreds of hours of listening sessions will inspire the Catholic Diocese of Peoria along the path of synodality and greater internal communion as it lives out its life of discipleship in the modern world.

Five themes have emerged as opportunities from the listening experiences, in addition to various other significant factors. These are:



1. A focus on renewed thirst for and commitment to the Holy Eucharist as central to our lives as missionary disciples by Baptismal calling. Our parishes are called to be dynamic communities of worship, welcome, and communities of vibrant faith life.
2. A greater and deepened sense of lived appreciation for and fidelity to our vocation to authentic holiness of life, in grace and all that is entailed with discerning and living our particular vocations. Holiness is lived out in the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, among other ways.
3. A renewed commitment to the New Evangelization and to Evangelization in general all across the Catholic Diocese of Peoria, to ignite a new fire within each heart and mind and across the land, permeating the world like leaven.
4. An activated realization of our call to discipleship as individuals, families, and as parishes to bring new life and vigor to all the communities and ministries of the Catholic Diocese of Peoria. Education, formation, and catechesis have a significant part to play in the life of intentional discipleship and invite renewed attentiveness.
5. The example and life of Venerable Fulton Sheen is a blessed focal point to renew support for the active development and sustainment of identity and well-being for all those called to the ministerial Priesthood.